

WORKFORCE HORIZONS

Planning Tomorrow's Workforce Today

Louisiana Department of Civil Service

Volume Three, Issue 30: September 2008

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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EXECUTIVE DECISION MAKING

In today's rapidly changing world, executives are often called upon to make bold decisions and venture into new areas as a result of technological innovations, downsizing, budget cuts, or reorganizations. The most effective leaders use all the information available to them and cultivate the views of others who are in a position to better assess consequences of a specific course of action.

To do this successfully, leaders need to be aware of the nuances of communication. Subordinates are often reluctant to express directly any concerns they may have about a course of action proposed or favored by an executive for fear of negative consequences to their careers. They may just tell the leader what they think he or she wants to

WORKFORCE PLANNING MAXIM OF THE DAY

"There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long range risks of comfortable inaction." – John F. Kennedy

hear. They may express their concerns informally to peers with the executive never becoming aware of the concerns. This restriction on the free flow of information tends to increase the higher up in the organization an executive gets. The result is poorer quality decisions and less buy-in for any course of action from subordinates who have concerns they feel were never addressed.

So how does an executive overcome this? Here are some tips adapted from the article "Developing a Peripheral Vision" in the Spring 2008 issue of *Leader to Leader*.¹

Create openings for contrary viewpoints. To improve the quality of decision making, it is important to create a leadership team staffed with talented individuals including those who have demonstrated a willingness to take a contrary point of view when needed. A diversity of views, when managed effectively, results in higher quality decisions.

Beware of silence. When leadership teams meet to discuss a proposed course of action, persons who disagree or have concerns may simply disengage by being silent. This is especially true if the leader has an overly dominant style or communicates a sense that action needs to be taken hurriedly or that the decision is pretty much already made. The senior leader should continually monitor who is contributing in a group discussion and who is not and make an effort to get input from those who are not contributing either during the meeting or by talking to them privately later.

Beware of what is not said. Omissions can sometimes be the most critical issues. Sometimes there can be an elephant in the room that the leadership group is reluctant to bring up because they feel the top executive is reluctant to talk about it.

Beware of particular phrases or words that should be red flags. If, for example, in a state agency, a team member expresses concern that a proposed action is a “Civil Service Rule violation” or that it “violates long standing agency policy,” the issue is an important one that warrants attention.

Tap into off-line input. Sometimes people only say what they really think during the breaks or hallway conversations as opposed to formal discussions. Not all such informal talk is relevant, but such conversations often give a truer picture of what people really believe than what is said in formal discussions.

Follow up team discussions by meeting with individuals as needed. Many times a person may be more comfortable talking to the senior leader in private about his or her concerns rather than in a group meeting. It can be particularly effective for the senior leader to go to the office of a team member

to solicit additional input (as opposed to bringing the team member to the executive’s office).

Be willing to just listen. Sometimes when a difficult topic has been on the table a while, the senior leader feels compelled to propel the group onward or fill in an awkward silence. It is sometimes better to ask people clearly and directly what they think and then just listen. Eventually people will unburden themselves. The leader jumping in may tend to shut down other people’s willingness to contribute.

Find the information “hubs.” Every organization has persons who are trusted and to whom others may reveal information or thoughts they would not share with the senior executive or in a group meeting. These persons understand how the members of the organization really feel about an issue. These persons play an important role in an organization. Senior executives need to learn how to tap into these persons to find out what issues require further exploration.

The credibility of the senior executive is critical. Leaders may say they want to hear contrary points of view. But employees will quickly judge the degree to which the leader truly means this, based on the leader’s actual behaviors. If there is even a perception that persons expressing contrary viewpoints do not have their views actually considered or suffer negative consequences to their careers or are “punished” even subtly or unintentionally as a result of their straight talk, this valuable well of information will dry up with great detriment to the organization.

¹Ronald, Mark H. and Shaw, Robert B., “Developing Peripheral Vision,” *Leader to Leader*, No. 48, Spring 2008

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Besides being one of our most famous Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin was a successful businessman, scientist, politician and diplomat. Many people know that Franklin wrote America's first best-seller, *Poor Richard's Almanac*; he signed and helped create both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and, as a scientist, he discovered electricity and invented bifocals.

But Franklin had many other accomplishments that demonstrated his extraordinary leadership skills. These accomplishments include:

- Establishing America's first public library
- Forming America's first fire fighting department
- Establishing America's first non-sectarian university-the University of Pennsylvania
- Building the first media conglomerate franchises throughout the American colonies
- Revolutionizing mail service while serving as postmaster general by establishing home delivery and one-day service
- Negotiating our strategic alliance with France which helped win the Revolution

Franklin based his leadership on these guiding principles:

1. Continuous education is important.
2. Be willing to take risks.
3. Focus on goals beyond yourself. "To pour forth benefits for the common good is divine".
4. Be willing to give others credit in order to achieve success.

5. Be able to compromise. "Give up some smaller points in order to obtain greater."
6. Build strategic partnerships.
7. Embrace change.
8. Think for the long term.

For more on Benjamin Franklin's leadership lessons, click on this link and read "[Benjamin Franklin's Extraordinary Leadership](#)" by Jack Uldrich.²

²Uldrich, Jack, "Benjamin Franklin's Extraordinary Leadership." *Leader to Leader*, No.38, Fall 2005

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader." – **John Quincy Adams**

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Issued: Monthly

Purpose: The purpose of the Workforce Horizons is to educate readers about workforce planning issues and best practices, inform them about upcoming Civil Service workshops and training related to workforce planning and to provide practical job aids to assist agencies with workforce planning.

Comments and submissions: We welcome questions about workforce planning and suggestions for improvements to the newsletter as well as submissions of articles about what your agency is doing in workforce planning. Questions and comments should be sent to the editor.

Current and Back Issues may be viewed by going to the workforce planning portal of the Civil Service web page at www.civilservice.louisiana.gov